

[REDACTED]

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Special Analysis

IRAN:

Growing Threat to Persian Gulf Shipping

Iran has increased its military presence in the Gulf over the past year and poses the greatest threat to maritime trade—and US ships—in the region. Tehran will continue to conduct selective harassing attacks, focusing on ships trading with Kuwait—including unescorted Soviet- and US-flag commercial ships. Iran is likely to probe cautiously for an opportunity to attack an escorted ship. It probably would prefer to avoid attacking a foreign warship, although such ships also face increased hazards.

The Iranians have attacked 25 ships this year, with the rate of attack increasing rapidly over the past eight weeks. Iranian naval forces have attacked seven ships this month, two since the Iraqi strike on the USS Stark. The quickened pace suggests mounting frustration in Tehran over Iraqi attacks last month, Kuwait's steadfast support for Iraq, and Kuwait's efforts to enlist US and Soviet protection for Kuwaiti shipping. Tehran's harsh criticism of Kuwait, the USSR, and the US portends further, possibly more aggressive, attacks on shipping.

Capabilities . . .

Iran has used a variety of weapons and tactics in its attacks on shipping. In the lower Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, Iranian destroyers and frigates have used Seakiller surface-to-surface missiles and naval gunfire. They have also helped locate, identify, and track potential targets for attack by helicopters or fast patrol boats. Iran may have used small boats to lay mines near Kuwait that have damaged two ships this month.

The Iranians have also used fighter aircraft armed with Maverick missiles and helicopters armed with wire-guided antitank missiles. More recently, small boats carrying recoilless rifles, rocket grenades, and machineguns have fired at tankers. Although such attacks have caused little damage, they are more difficult to avoid because they can occur with little warning and can be launched from a variety of bases—including coastal naval stations, small islands, offshore oil platforms, and larger naval vessels.

The HY-2 (Silkworm) surface-to-surface antiship missile is another, more destructive weapon in Iran's arsenal.

The Silkworm system is highly mobile, and the missile's 1,100-pound (500-kilogram) warhead—seven times larger than that of the Sea

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Killer—is capable of severely damaging or sinking a tanker. The system has not yet been deployed, and it may be a weapon of last resort—for use only if Iran's oil exports are severely reduced or if Iran is threatened in other ways. [REDACTED]

Iran also has developed unconventional weapons and methods to attack shipping. [REDACTED] the Revolutionary Guard has small speedboats intended for suicide attacks on ships. Each boat would carry half a ton of explosives that would be detonated after it rammed a target. [REDACTED]

... and Constraints

Iran's ability to use its naval forces effectively is severely limited by equipment problems. Cannibalization and innovative repairs have kept the Navy's larger ships operable; all need major overhauls, however, and Iran has only limited repair and drydock facilities. More important, the older weapons and complex electronic equipment support systems are increasingly unreliable. [REDACTED]

Prospects

Despite these limitations, Iran has the forces to increase its antishipping operations, especially if it concentrates on ships headed for Kuwait. [REDACTED]

Tehran may launch attacks simultaneously throughout the Gulf to increase the vulnerability of shipping. Iran may risk a small boat or aircraft in an attack against a US-escorted tanker in a bid to humiliate one of the superpowers by showing that its warships cannot stop Iranian attacks. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] DIA and INR disagree with the above with respect to the issue of the likelihood of Iranian attacks on unescorted and escorted Soviet- and US-flag ships. We assess the likelihood of an attack on an escorted ship as low and on an unescorted ship as moderate. [REDACTED]